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Stigter, S.

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# How Material Is Conceptual Art?

## FROM CERTIFICATE TO MATERIALIZATION: INSTALLATION PRACTICES OF JOSEPH KOSUTH'S *GLASS [ONE AND THREE]*

Sanneke Stigter

### Abstract

This chapter explores museum practice and the curatorial management of Joseph Kosuth's *Glass [one and three]* with a special focus on material evidence. The installation history of the work will be analysed and different reinstallation strategies will be considered and questioned in order to gain perspective on curatorial and conservation practice. This material-based research encourages reflection on the role of the art conservator in the interpretation and display of conceptual art.

### Introduction

*Glass [one and three]*, [English-Flemish], dated 1965 is a conceptual artwork by Joseph Kosuth in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum. With his work, Kosuth questions the mechanisms of the Western art world, undermining the artwork as a material object; this is in contrast with the traditional starting point of conservation and museum practice. This is why conceptual art is so challenging to the field of conservation. It pushes institutionalized museum practices to their boundaries, forcing the conservator to look beyond the traditional conservation paradigm and reflect upon the impact of the profession. How does one interpret the artist's certificate (diagram), along with the history and curatorial management of the artwork? What can be said about the artwork's proclaimed site-specificity and the artist's intent? It has been claimed that the photograph in *Glass [one and three]* should be renewed at every location, but different strategies have been found. The aim of this chapter is to provide insight into the lines of reasoning during decision-making on conservation, and presentation strategies to allow a more transparent view on the constructed nature of these decisions marking the various moments throughout the life of an artwork.

### Case study

#### Conceptual art

Conceptual art is a term used for art from the 1960s and 1970s that intentionally negates the high value traditionally assigned to the unique art object. Sol LeWitt's explanation is often quoted: 'In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work... all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.' Often conceptual art is not fabricated by the artist but made by the owner or the public through instructions. 'Non-materials', such as language and impersonal, reproducible media like photography, are used.

**Joseph Kosuth**

Joseph Kosuth [1945, Toledo, Ohio, US] is one of the leading conceptual artists. He aims to present 'art as idea as idea' and refers to his work as 'investigations' rather than [fixed] works of art.<sup>1</sup> *One and three chairs* [1965], an object – a chair – presented in form, image and text marks the starting point of his career. A whole series of 'proto-investigations' followed that was based on the same principle but each carried out with a different object. The irrelevance of the object to the idea of the artwork becomes clear. Kosuth, however, did choose the object, and I will argue that the type of object, and its material, does add meaning to the 'investigation'.

**Glass (one and three)**

*Glass [one and three]* is one of the proto-investigations. It consists of a sheet of glass leaning against the wall flanked by its photograph on the left and the object's dictionary definition on the right. As with all of Kosuth's proto-investigations, the conceptual notion of the object, along with the image and text are seemingly indifferent to their material characteristics. Depending on how the artwork is managed, the photographs may consist of gelatin silver prints on either fibre-based or resin-coated paper and may be pinned to the wall or, when mounted on fibreboard or aluminium, held up by L-screws. The text image is often called a 'Photostat' but this refers to a brand name of an already obsolete technique while actually a gelatin silver print is used<sup>2</sup>. Type, thickness and maybe even the size of the sheet of glass may vary. These shifts in materials and techniques show how much the look of the artwork is determined by the choices made by different stakeholders over time, either made consciously or as the result of practicalities.

**Case research**

For *Glass [one and three]* a 'diagram' was provided with instructions to execute the artwork. The question is how to interpret these instructions; because not much is specified and different approaches have been taken over time. During the search for a good installation practice, various sources were studied meticulously. Evidence was not only found in their content but also in their material particularities as demonstrated by sources 'A' to 'M', described below.

**A. Installation history**

In 1977, *Glass [one and three]* was acquired by private collector Geertjan Visser and first created in his Antwerp apartment. The photograph of the glass showed Visser's tiled floor, the same floor on which the whole work was installed, generating a visual site-specific effect. This characteristic was lost when the work entered the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum as a long-term loan in 1979. The 'original' parts were handed over, which consequently had been used to install the work in the museum. With the official acquisition in 1995, this practice was not changed. The installation procedures did change, however, in 2005 when the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam wished to install the work with a newly made photograph to meet the initial visual site-specific character. This was claimed to be the artist's intent by then-director

<sup>1</sup> Kosuth often subtitles his work 'Art as Idea as Idea' and catalogues his early work as a series of 'investigations'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Photostat' is a brand name for an obsolete camera-based photographic copying machine used in the graphic industry, mainly in the first half of the twentieth century. The image was directly printed onto photosensitized paper to make an image out of a collaged composition before printing. The first Photostat is a negative image [black] and this is then used to make new Photostats for positive images. For the first proto-investigation(s) a Photostat could have been used, but the use of the term could also refer to the idea of this technique. The 'wet' photocopying on photosensitized paper was gradually abandoned and taken over by 'dry' copy machines by Xerox [Kingslake 1974].

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Kosuth, Certificate of *Glass [one and three]*, 1976, pencil and ink on paper, 30.3 x 45.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 125.436.

<sup>4</sup> Diagram depicted on second page of Kosuth, no year.

Rudi Fuchs. For this occasion, a new photograph was made of the glass situated on the parquet floor of the Stedelijk Museum. It made the artwork contemporary to the actual time and space, which in itself is interesting in a retrospective show on conceptual art in the Netherlands and Belgium. If it would be considered suitable to show the work in a 'historic form' using the 'original' photograph, I would say that it would have been in this context. Interestingly the exhibition catalogue shows the installation view of *Glass [one and three]* in the former situation with the 'Visser photograph' in the Kröller-Müller Museum <sup>1</sup>. It is unclear how 'authentic' the idea of renewing the photograph is, because this is not specified in the accompanying certificate.

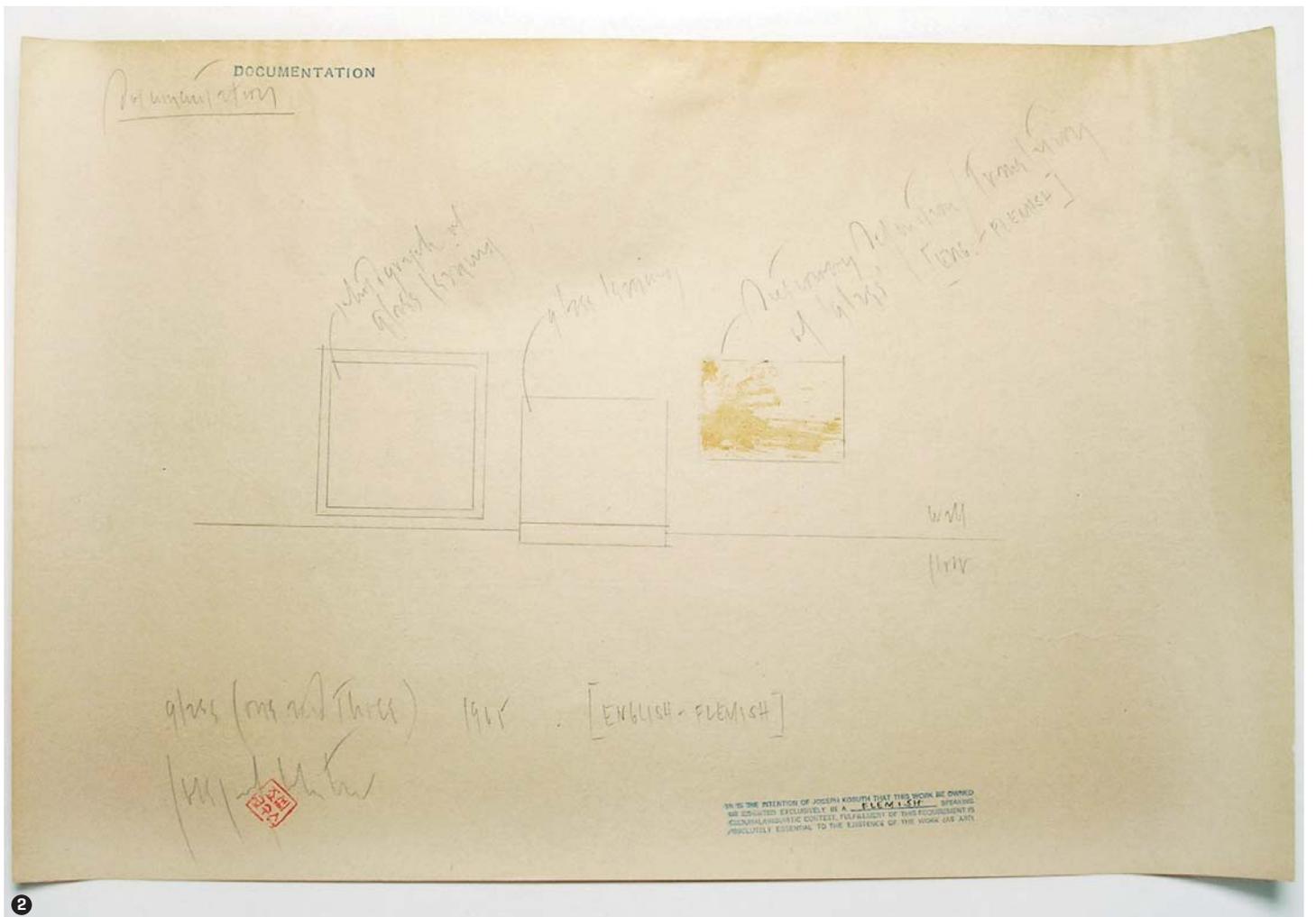
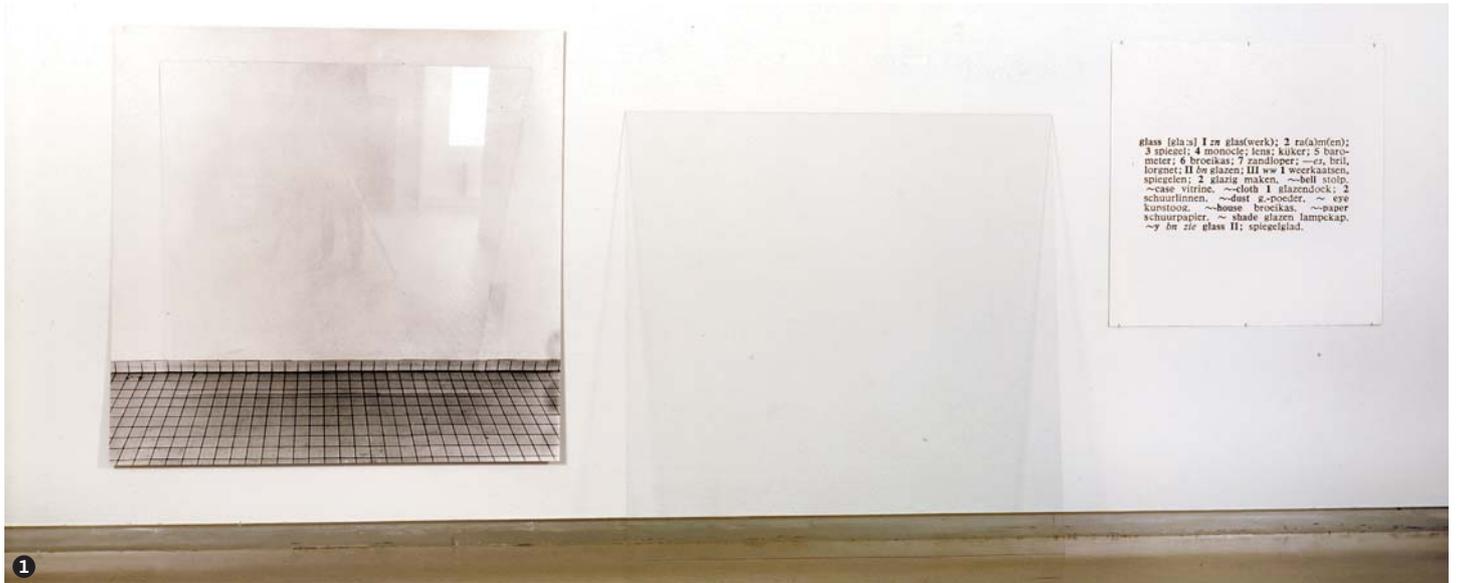
### B. Certificate

The diagram, regarded as the certificate of Kosuth's *Glass [one and three]*, only consists of a schematic drawing marked 'Diagram' with some explanatory words next to each of the depicted parts and a stamp <sup>2</sup>. The stamp reads: 'It is the intention of Joseph Kosuth that this work be owned or exhibited exclusively in a *FLEMISH* [filled out by hand] speaking cultural/linguistic context. Fulfilment of this requirement is absolutely essential to the existence of the work [as art]'.<sup>3</sup> This statement is quite specific. It is made clear that the work cannot be exhibited outside the area where one speaks Flemish; nothing is said about interchanging the dictionary definition. What can be concluded from the diagram is that the form of the installation dictates the context rather than the other way around. A location that is determined by language implies that there are more options within the set region of Flanders and the Netherlands where the same dictionary is used. Thus the installation possibilities are not restricted to the site where the photograph is taken, but nothing is said about renewing the photograph at any other location.

### C. Drawing technique

The idea of renewing the photograph was not found on any of the other diagrams for 'proto-investigations' that I studied. What did come up was the question of whether the photograph should depict the object at life size. This is clearly stated for *One and three tables*: 'Image of photo and "real" table should be the same size'.<sup>4</sup> However in *Glass [one and three]* the photograph and the real object both measure 120 x 120 centimetres, so the glass is shown smaller on the photograph.

A close study of the drawing technique of the diagram for *Glass [one and three]* reveals that it is likely that precise dimensions are given because a ruler was used, judging from the perfect straight lines that run a little too far at each corner. When the object and its image are measured, it becomes clear that they have to be equal in size. There is only a three millimetre difference. This can be easily overlooked, and was probably the reason why this was never noticed before. Would this be enough evidence to instigate an installation guideline for a life-size representation of the object in *Glass [one and three]*? Before this question is dealt with, other sources are considered with reference to the idea of replacement of the photograph at other locations.



1 Joseph Kosuth, *Glass (One and Three)*, [English-Flemish], 1965, Kröller-Müller Museum 1999. Glass, gelatin silver prints on aluminium, installation size 150 x 350 x 12.5 cm. KM 112.078. The photograph that is used shows the former owner's tiled floor. PHOTO Cary Markerink, depicted in Héman, Poot and Visser, pp. 158-159. 2 Joseph Kosuth, *Certificate of Glass (One and Three)*, [English-Flemish], 1976. Pencil and ink on paper, 30.3 x 45.5 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum, KM 125.436. PHOTO Sanneke Stigter.

<sup>5</sup> Photo by Jay Cantor, in: Kosuth 1973, Vol. 1, 17.

<sup>6</sup> The instruction also states that the original photograph 'can be kept as part of the piece'. Invoice 20 October 1970 consulted 29 August 2005 with the kind help of Roger Griffith from the Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>7</sup> Instructions after consultation with the artist's assistant in 2002. Archive Centre Pompidou, consulted 30 June 2009 with the kind help of Evelyne Pomey.

#### D. Similar work

Other proto-investigations are found installed both with a newly made photograph as well as outside of a visual site-related context. Kosuth's own writing and authorized catalogues always show the proto-investigations in a 'site-related' form; with a photograph made at the installations site. What also becomes apparent in comparison with similar work is the different placement of parts. In some investigations the photograph rests on the floor, in others it is on the plinth or is presented on the wall like a painting. The way the parts are distributed over the wall varies, as does the way the photographs are hung.

#### E. Site specificity

I prefer to use the term 'site-related' to describe the visual relation to the surroundings of the proto-investigations, rather than 'site-specific' because the site itself does not contribute any intentional meaning to the artwork. The site is not chosen by the artist. The look of the work is adapted to its surroundings when a newly made photograph is used upon installation. The site could be anywhere, albeit within a set region as we have seen.

*One and three chairs*, Kosuth's first proto-investigation, is best known from the installation photograph showing the situation in the artist's studio, the context in which the work was first assembled.<sup>5</sup> The chair was photographed in the studio and the resulting image was used in the same studio setting, for this was the space where the artist worked. The visual unity with the site could even be a quality that was not thought of consciously beforehand, but might have only become apparent while first assembling the work or upon re-installation elsewhere when the visual site-specificity was suddenly missing. This does not immediately become apparent in a museum with white walls, because of the artist's white studio wall.

#### F. One and three chairs' installation guidelines

The Museum of Modern Art acquired *One and three chairs* in 1970 from Kosuth. At that time no diagram was provided. 'Instructions' were typewritten on the invoice stating that the photograph of the chair should be replaced for correct installation, 'where the floor and/or wall appear different from what can be seen in the photo, the photograph of the chair should be replaced for correct installation'.<sup>6</sup> This clearly specifies a visual unity for the work, and at the same time seems to provide the freedom to use the old photograph when a similar-looking setting is chosen.

#### G. One and three chairs' curatorial management

*One and three chairs* had been installed in different settings since its acquisition, most of the time with the 'original' photograph. Often the desired visual relation to its site was ignored. Research into the installation history and the curatorial management of the French version of *One and three chairs*, in the collection of Centre Georges Pompidou since 1974, shows a similar pattern. The installation guidelines were only specified in 1991 when Kosuth provided a certificate because this had been lacking in the institution's inventory. Apart from the photograph having to be made 'in situ', it is further specified that the photographs should be displayed with drawing pins.<sup>7</sup>

It can be concluded that museum practice can take place independent of the artist, differing from presentations that are in accordance with the artist's wishes by museums that have a more independent policy.

#### H. Artist's statements

Kosuth's own writing and statements all point towards the need for replacement of the photograph in this type of work. 'Everything you saw when you looked at the object had to be the same that you saw in the photograph, so each time the work was exhibited the new installation necessitated a new photograph'.<sup>8</sup> None of the statements are contemporary to the date of conception of the work in 1965. They could therefore be judged less valuable in relation to the supposedly objective historical truth that is generally looked for in conservation decisions.

#### I. Historic photograph

The artist's statements are contemporary to the first evidence of the [material] existence of *Glass [one and three]*. The first record that could be found is a photograph published in 1973 and shows the work in a site-related form.<sup>9</sup> This photographic source could be used as a touchstone in time to validate the artist's statements regarding *Glass [one and three]*.

#### J. Conservator's interpretation

The argument that is based on the first proof of the material existence of the artwork separates *Glass [one and three]* from *One and three chairs* in time, whereas Kosuth dates both the artworks as 1965, according to the birth of the concept. This distinction facilitates decision-making in favour of a strategy that pursues renewing the photograph at other locations because this was specified long after 1965. By plotting the different executions of the proto-investigations on a timeline, I can justify renewal as part of the 'artworks' defining properties' (Laurenson), and at the same time stay true to conservation ethics that are based on unity in time and context (Brandi 1977).

#### K. Other viewpoints

Although a vast amount of literature can be found on Kosuth's *One and three chairs*, very little was found on *Glass [one and three]*. Art historian Marga van Mechelen, however, has written about this work. She explains how installing Kosuth's proto-investigations using the original materials independent of the site could work by considering the concept of the proto-investigation a 'type' in semiotic terms and its executions as 'tokens'. The message of the artwork would be communicated all the same. She even states that one should not focus on the authenticity of the material objects nor make it a site-specific work, because the work is about conceptualizing and imagining as an intellectual effort (Van Mechelen 2006). This viewpoint would justify installation practices independent of the artist's statements.

#### L. Meaning of material

When different proto-investigations are studied as independent material manifestations, it could be argued that the choice of material contributes to

<sup>8</sup> Quote from radio interview: 'Art as Idea as Idea: an interview with Jeanne Siegel', broadcast on WBAI, 7 April 1970, Kosuth 1991, p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Photo by Eric Pollitzer, in: Kosuth 1973, Vol. 1, p. 31.

the work's meaning. Glass as a material must have been chosen for its transparency. It could serve as an object that is as transparent as possible, negating itself through its own material characteristics. Compared to *One and three chairs, Glass [one and three]* seems to be a more refined proto-investigation that fits the development of Kosuth's thinking.

#### M. Meaning of form

When the photograph is taken at the installation site, the idea of transparency is also present in the image in the proto-investigations. The photograph then de-objectifies itself as such because the background optically disappears in the real surroundings of the site. The object's image becomes the central focus and not the entity of the black-and-white photograph. Transparency rendered by a site-related photograph therefore suits Kosuth's idea of the proto-investigations perfectly. When the aim of renewing the photograph is understood as the creation of an image as transparent in its surroundings as possible, then the visual site-specific character could be regarded as a meaningful 'by-product' in the artwork, not as an objective in itself. This notion allows room to decide not to renew the photograph if a similar surrounding is chosen that guarantees a similar transparency, which could also be read in Kosuth's guidelines for *One and three chairs* [see source F above].

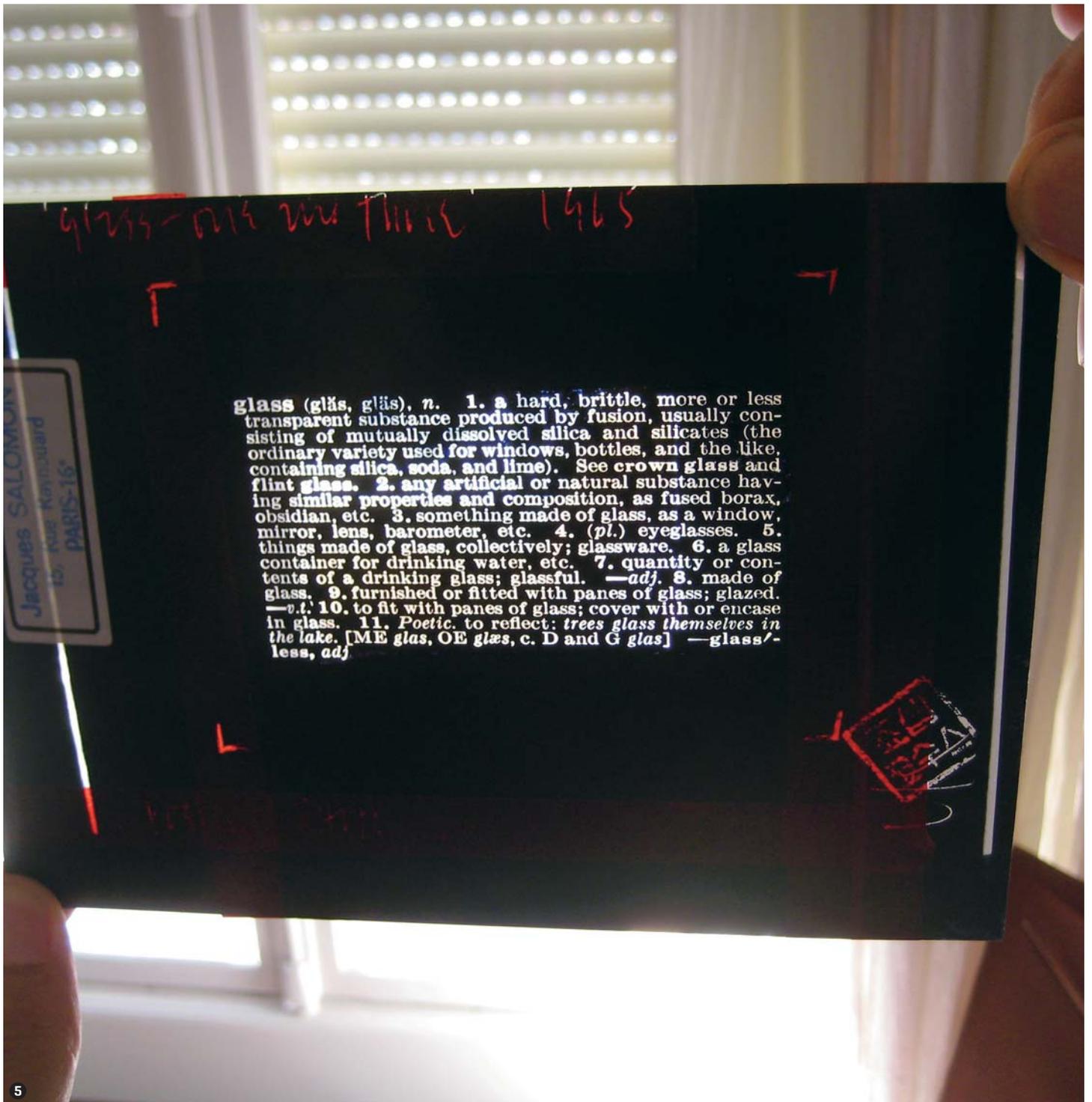
#### Decision-making

At a certain point one has to feel confident enough to take a decision on how to 'materialize' the artwork. In the tradition of the Dutch contemporary art conservators who are often also trained art historians like myself, this decision is in practice made by the conservator after formulation of the options and is taken in consultation with the curator, head of collections or the museum director. After considering and validating a lot of art historical evidence complemented with material evidence derived from the artwork itself, I was convinced that it would be best to show *Glass [one and three]* with a new photograph matching the surroundings of the site where the work would be installed. On the one hand, this decision was easy to make because it would not harm the original materials, which would be kept in storage [thereby allowing for perfect reversibility]; on the other hand, it was difficult because of the major impact this would have on the artwork's appearance. Conservators are taught to stay away from 'artistic' practices, keep a low profile and only perform interventions when absolutely necessary, always as minimal as possible. Determining a guideline for installation is much more visible for the public. Decisions about reinstallation should therefore only be made after balanced and meticulous research, preferably done by or in consultation with a conservator who understands the importance of combining material evidence derived from the artwork with art historical research, including the artist's own voice. I emphasize this because with conceptual installation art, one has to take on the role of re- or co-creator when the artwork needs to be installed, performed or indeed 'done' as argued by Vivian van Saaze. This is an act that is meaningful to the artwork itself.



glas [sla:] I zw glas(werk); 2 rafaal(en);  
 3 spiegel; 4 monocle; lens; Auker; 5 baro-  
 meter; 6 broekzak; 7 sandloper; ~ca, bril,  
 loermet; II bn glazen; III ww I weerkaatsen,  
 spiegelen; 2 slazze maken; ~bell stoep,  
 ~case vitrine; ~cloth I slazendoek; 2  
 schuurlinnen; ~dust g-pooder; ~ eye  
 kunstoc; ~house broekzak; ~paper  
 schuurpapier; ~shade glazen lampekap.  
 ~? bn zie glas II; spiegel.

glas [sla:] I zw glas(werk); 2 rafaal(en);  
 3 spiegel; 4 monocle; lens; Auker; 5 baro-  
 meter; 6 broekzak; 7 sandloper; ~ca, bril,  
 loermet; II bn glazen; III ww I weerkaatsen,  
 spiegelen; 2 slazze maken; ~bell stoep,  
 ~case vitrine; ~cloth I slazendoek; 2  
 schuurlinnen; ~dust g-pooder; ~ eye  
 kunstoc; ~house broekzak; ~paper  
 schuurpapier; ~shade glazen lampekap.  
 ~? bn zie glas II; spiegel.



- ③ Conservator Sanneke Stigter and photographer Hans Meesters discussing the production of a new photograph for *Glass [One and Three]* during the exhibition *Inside Installations* in the Kröller-Müller Museum, 25 October 2006–7 January 2007 continued 21 March–3 June 2007. The public could witness conservation treatment and reinstallation practice of installation case studies. The research questions were explained by documents, videos and interviews with the artist and the conservator. PHOTO Freek van Arkel. ④ Joseph Kosuth, *Glass [One and Three]*, 1965, Kröller-Müller Museum 2007. PHOTO Sanneke Stigter. ⑤ Transparency of the dictionary definition of the English word 'glass' to produce *Glass [One and Three]*, the English version in the Collection M.J.S., Paris. PHOTO Sanneke Stigter.

**Original / new materials and dimensions?**

This 'doing' of the artwork, a direct confrontation with the options in material manifestations, triggers essential questions that touch upon the fundamentals of what the artwork is or should [not] be [about]. That is why practice-based research in conservation strategies is so valuable.

For instance: when renewing the photograph is considered to be good practice, why not include a one-to-one scale representation of the object in the photograph as well? This guideline was not only deduced from the diagram and true for similar work, but also clearly stated by the artist himself: 'left of the object would be a full-scale photograph of it' (Kosuth 1991, 50). For *Glass [one and three]* this would mean that a larger photograph is needed for a life-size image of the glass. It feels wrong for a conservator to 'correct' part of the artwork's first manifestation, bringing to mind how painters 'restored' paintings in the past by painting over parts that they thought they could do better. Improving an artwork using our own insight is opposed to conservation ethics and guidelines based on minimal intervention honouring original manifestations.

For the sake of argument, the possibilities were explored to take the idea further. This proved useful because it shed new light on the material peculiarities of the artwork's initial manifestation. It turned out to be impossible to generate a gelatin silver print larger than 120 x 120 centimetres because of the maximum size of photographic paper. This would not be large enough to allow a life-sized representation of the original object. Using the maximum-sized paper would thus result in a slightly smaller image of the given object. These material limitations could have been the reason why the work had always existed in this form, considering the object as the leading factor. Indeed, the glass had been delivered first and the photograph was taken later (Van den Bosch and Van Kooten 2000).

[Im]possibilities in materialization always set the frame of how artworks are conceptualized and finally look. Big enlargements could only be done in black and white in the 1960s. Interestingly, considering the work's conceptual nature, the black and white has never been abandoned in Kosuth's proto-investigations. This material characteristic does keep the artwork related to time of origin. Alternatively, when choosing a new photograph that could represent the object life size, one could opt for an inkjet print that could be printed in a sufficiently large enough format. This idea immediately makes one aware of the non-coloured nature of the photograph, knowing that inkjet is a colour-based reproduction technique. Another option would be to discard the original object and use a smaller sheet of glass. The consequence would be that the new glass would be close to the size of the textual definition, which would bring the composition of the whole artwork out of balance. That is, unless the text was changed as well...

**Stop!**

At this point the line of reasoning in decision-making was abandoned because it led too far from the 'authentic' parts of the artwork. But why is this? The discussion could have continued, but the opposite direction was followed. A traditional gelatin silver print was chosen, similar to the old photograph. I still

<sup>10</sup> Depicted in: Mollet-Viéville, p. 73. I would like to express my gratitude to Miriam and Jacques Salomon for their kind help during my research.

ask myself what purpose the choice for authentic-looking photographic paper over an inkjet print actually serves when one knows that in order to match its current surroundings the photograph *has* to be made anew? The original glass is still used, so the image is smaller, using the argument that the work had never existed with a photograph larger than the dimensions of the glass. But why is favouring the original object in the proto-investigation over a better-fitting substitute that meets the installation guidelines the right choice? After completion of reinstallation using the original glass and new photographs, it turned out that the difference in size becomes even more apparent when the work is installed in front of a brick wall because of the disruption of the pattern ③ ④.

### To be continued

Reflection on the reasoning in service of decision-making shows how the arguments used could still be debated. During the last phase of the case research, the 1973 image of *Glass [one and three]* was looked at again in close detail [see source I above]. When the separate parts of *Glass [one and three]* are measured from this reproduction, it becomes clear that a life-sized image of the glass is used. Is this the same work? The definition has a different text layout. It appears to be in English, not Flemish-English, so this must be either the same work in a different context, or a different version.

The depicted version was tracked down and is now in the Collection M.J.S. in Paris.<sup>10</sup> This find, which could be regarded 'source N' in this investigation, is very important in the reconsideration of the work in the Kröller-Müller Museum. In the English version, the sheet of glass is smaller, allowing a perfect life-sized depiction. No 'diagram' was provided upon acquisition, only minimal instructions by Kosuth on the installation photo published in 1973 and a slide for the text, leaving the production entirely to the owner ⑤. In either case, new installation practices will keep on forming new moments in the live[s] of *Glass [one and three]*, drawing up interesting biographies.

### Conclusion

The material manifestations of Joseph Kosuth's proto-investigations such as *Glass [one and three]* trigger fundamental questions about both the nature and the history of the artwork as well as museum – and conservation practice. During in-depth analyses of art-historical sources in combination with the artwork's material particularities and fabrication techniques, the specialist focus of the conservator is indispensable for decision-making, as reinstallation practice itself will translate the concept into a material manifestation again. It is important to be aware of the constructed nature of decisions directing this practice and communicate this clearly to allow a transparent view of the concept of the artwork and prevent this from being blurred by different material manifestations that are always dependent on choices and possibilities in time. The conservator's task is that of a mediator, making the experience of the artworks possible in a consciously and carefully chosen presentation.

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